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STATE FOR NEA/ELA - LAWSON, NEA/ELA - IRWIN, NEA/PPD, R,
INR/R/MR, INR-PARENT,
NSC - SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - February 24, 2009

Atmospherics:

The Lebanese media highlighted visits by the head of the International Commission investigating former PM Hariri's assassination, Daniel Bellemare, to President Suleiman, Speaker Berri, and Prime Minister Siniora to bid them farewell before he left for The Hague. The press also noted that there were no developments in the on-going conflict between the Speaker and the Prime Minister over the budget.

An editorialist in Arab nationalist As-Safir newspaper reported speculations that Senator Kerry "digested a lesson" about Lebanon that was reportedly given to him by Acting A/S Feltman. The editorialist sharply criticized Senator Kerry's statements about the parliamentary elections and his style which "reminded the Lebanese of Feltman's style," noting that "talking in this manner three months before the elections is not wise...and may eventually backfire." He also noted that, Feltman's support for the Cedar Revolution did nothing "except deepen divisions and provocations..."

Selected Headlines

"The Tribunal's Week: Bellemare Bids Farewell and Security Measures To Protect the Lebanese Judges" Pro-Sunni Al-Liwa'

"1471 Days Later After Hariri's Assassination: The International Tribunal To Open Today for Media Representatives" Pro-Hariri Ash-Sharq

"Suleiman: Democracy is Acceptance of the Results of the Laws" Pro-Hariri Al-Mustaqbal

Block Quotes:

"Feltman's Logic," an editorial by George Alam in Arab nationalist As-Safir (2/24):

"It is being said behind the scenes that, before he came to Lebanon, Senator Kerry...talked to Ambassador Feltman and digested a special lesson about Lebanon which he (Kerry) cleverly reported when he came to Beirut. ...The opposition is dealing with great care with the U.S. involvement in the elections on March 14's side, and says that this is not good for President Suleiman and his compromise role. ...Senator Kerry reminded the Lebanese of Ambassador Feltman's style when he was in Beirut..., and boycotted the President (Lahoud). Kerry's style seemed to revive (Feltman's) style when he ignored the President's (Suleiman) status, and his effort to create compromise. ...The opposition believes that this manner in dealing with Lebanon is a blatant strike against civil peace. ...What reduces the impact of this American involvement, however, is the fact that the U.S. Administration did not publicly adopt these (Kerry's) statements.Talking in this manner three months before the elections is not wise...and may eventually backfire. In any case, U.S. support was never beneficial, but many times was closer to propaganda. What did this 'Feltmanian's' support for the Cedar Revolution do except deepen divisions and provocations which is a burden on the shoulders of all Lebanese without exception."

"Rockets in the South and Moving Explosions Are Pushing Diplomats into Asking Questions," an editorial by Khalil Flayhan in moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar (2/24):

"The security situation in Lebanon is back as a subject of concern for Arab and foreign Ambassadors in Lebanon...particularly the launching of the rockets against Israel. ...Despite the amateurish set-up of the rockets, Ambassadors noted that those who launched the rockets were clever enough to target civilian places inside Israel.Arab diplomatic sources in Beirut confirmed that there were no documented answers to the questions about the security situation in Lebanon. They described...the security situation as 'fragile' and chaotic. ...The only positive element is the fact that there has been no Hizballah operation against Israel through the Lebanese-Israeli border since the end of the July war in 2006..."

"Kerry's Request for Syria to Interfere with Hizballah Raises Questions," an editorial by Rosana Bou-Monsef in moderate, anti-Syrian An-Nahar (2/24):

"Senator Kerry's visit...satisfied the Lebanese...and the Europeans

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because...of his confirmation that the new U.S. Administration is committed to Lebanon's sovereignty. ...Sources noted in particular, however, Kerry's announcement that the U.S. wants Syria to help in disarming Hizballah...because they know that the U.S. will enter a maze over this issue with Syria...Some speculated that perhaps the U.S. thinks that Syria might help in disarming Hizballah in return for a greater Syrian influence in Lebanon. ...Others, however, say that they have no fears and recall...that there are international resolutions now that deal with Hizballah's weapons. ...They disclose that the U.N. is working on preparing a legal study about the possibility of taking statements by Syrian officials into consideration and use it as a legal confirmation of the Lebanese ownership of the Shebaa Farms. ...But now, we have to take into consideration the French experience with Syria and their feeling that, as a first step, Syria is practicing blackmail by not nominating a Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon..."

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